

Land of the Ancients

As an 'agritourist' in southwest Colorado you can trace 1,300 years of food production

Gigi Ragland
Text and photograph

Mesas, canyons, and mountains. Embraced by vertical fortresses of nature, the valleys below these expansive geological wonders carried riches of abundant water, fertile soil, and wildlife, sustaining a culture revealed to us in modern times as “ancestral puebloans,” the “Ancients” of Mesa Verde Country. Travel beyond the mountain towns of southwest Colorado and you will catch a glimpse of the past in the form of crumbling pueblos and cliff dwellings tucked within sandstone canyons—silent reminders of the thriving civilization that prospered in the area from 1 to 1300 AD.

Another nod to the ways of the past are the vast fields yielding plentiful dry-land crops farmed by the Ancients. Like a vibrant green, brown, and golden-colored patchwork quilt blanketing the valleys and mesas at harvest time, the agricultural crops once cultivated by the ancestral puebloans—corn, beans, and squash—still fill the market baskets of today. The traditions of the Ancients provided an agricultural foundation for farmers and ranchers throughout the centuries and are evidenced in modern times by touring the many “agritourism” opportunities in Mesa Verde Country. [A relatively new term, *agritourism*, as its name implies, employs an agricultural place or activity to bring in tourists—Ed.]

STARTING OUT

Consider flying into Cortez, Colorado. Rent a car and take a road trip along the national scenic byway, “Trail of the Ancients,” considered the “archaeological



The ancestral puebloans grew crops on the mesa above the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings. One theory as to why they built their homes under the cliffs is that water seeping down through the rocks was more readily available than above.

heartland of America.” The route covers remote archaeological sites and significant cultural and historical sites in Arizona, Colorado, and Utah. In the Centennial State, this includes Mesa Verde National Park, Ute Mountain Tribal Park, the Anasazi Heritage Center, Lowry Pueblo, Canyon of the Ancients and Hovenweep National Monuments, the Cortez Cultural Center, and more.

Since there are miles and miles to explore, a stop at the **Anasazi Heritage Center** offers an excellent overview of the history and culture of the ancestral puebloans, previously referred to as the Anasazi, which is Navajo in origin. An hour or so can be spent in the museum viewing exhibits and interactive displays. A few favorites are the prep and cooking display where visitors can take a *metate* (stone utensil) and grind corn as the puebloans did over a thousand years ago. Or place shards of ancient pottery under a microscope to view patterns in the clay.

A 2-mile walk along a wheelchair-accessible path leads to the remains of Escalante Pueblo. The winding path is bordered by a desert mountain garden

displaying a variety of shrubs, flowers, and trees used by the Ancients to produce household and food items such as ropes, mats, sandals, and basketry made from the fiber of the yucca plant.

Before you leave, be sure to pick up some maps and brochures of the area for hiking trails, sites, and events. Not far from the center is **Canyon of the Ancients National Monument** where you can hike along trails to outcroppings of cliff dwelling ruins and test your knowledge identifying plants and trees like prickly pear cactus, piñon, globemallow, and bee balm. Head to **Hovenweep National Monument** to see six ancestral puebloan sites along an easily accessible marked trail. At Hovenweep Castle you'll discover a line of rocks that span a small streambed, indicating that here early farmers built check dams to irrigate their plantings.

At **Mesa Verde National Park** there are ranger-led tours of the magnificent cliff dwellings and mesa-top villages. Foodies will enjoy the award-winning, Metate Room Restaurant located at the Far View Lodge, featuring sustainable and local-heritage foods.

WORK AND EAT LIKE A COWGIRL AND COWBOY

Now that you have seen where and how the Ancients lived and what types of plants existed then, you might like to sample the types of crops grown. Dove Creek is a blink-your-eye-and-it's-gone type of town, but it has a giant-size reputation as "Pinto Bean Capitol of the World." On either side of the road you will see miles and miles of dry-land beans growing, mostly pinto and Anasazi varieties. In fact, Anasazi beans were one of the few cultivated crops grown by the ancestral puebloans. They were found in ruins by settlers in the Four Corners area in the early 1900s. Presently, the beans are grown on the same lands the Ancients inhabited. Stop at **Adobe Milling Company** (anasazibean.com) to buy sacks of beans to take home. You can also purchase local popping corn, locally milled flour, and other gourmet legumes—on site or by mail order.

To see more modern farming tools besides the hoe and metate, be on the lookout for antique tractors—lots of them (over 100)—at the **Antique Tractor Outdoor Museum**, also in Dove Creek. You'll get an eyeful of farm implements,

'Guests are welcome to participate in farm chores like feeding animals, irrigation, gardening, and are invited to pick their own veggies from the garden and free-range eggs from the hen house for meals.'

tractors, and other vehicles, with most in full operating condition.

Horseback riding is another way to tour the endless span of canyon lands and valleys. **East Pines Ranch** (eastpines.com) is a family owned working cattle ranch that is guaranteed to make you feel like a cowboy or cowgirl after a half-day or full-day ride. The ranch practices "intensive grazing" where they rotate their cattle on eight pastures of open rangeland.

Another place to bunk in the area is **Canyon of the Ancient's Guest Ranch** (canyonoftheancients.com), a top choice to pair agriculture with archeology. A historical guest ranch once owned by legendary cowboy, Elden Zwicker, it's now a working organic farmstead and private family home honoring the integrity of the open space. Guests have three choices of lodging: the beautifully restored and renovated Zwicker homestead cabin,

gorgeously refinished Stone House, and the tastefully modern-western Barn House. Guests are welcome to participate in farm chores like feeding animals, irrigation, gardening, and are invited to pick their own veggies from the garden and free-range eggs from the hen house for meals. Indian ruins have been found on the property, as well as petroglyphs; ask the owners for a tour of these special sites.

Anywhere you go within the heart of Mesa Verde Country and throughout the Colorado towns of Cortez, Mancos, Dolores, and Dove Creek, the ways of the Ancients can be discovered woven into the tapestry of their history. Agriculture is deeply embedded into the fabric of the area. It only takes one visit to understand how sacred this land is—for the Ancients, as well as current-day residents.

For more information, visit MesaVerdeCountry.com. 🐾

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